



Vocabulary development and its role in enhancing reading and speaking skills

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Abstract

Vocabulary is a central resource in language learning because it provides the lexical means through which learners interpret texts, construct meaning, express ideas, participate in interaction, and communicate in academic and professional settings. Yet vocabulary knowledge is often reduced to the memorisation of isolated words or dictionary definitions. A more comprehensive view treats vocabulary as multidimensional and incremental: knowing a lexical item may involve knowledge of its form, meaning, pronunciation, grammatical behaviour, collocations, word-family relationships, register, contextual restrictions, and ability to retrieve and use it appropriately. This conceptual article examines vocabulary development and its relationship with reading and speaking, with particular attention to learners of English as a second or foreign language and to the needs of higher education. Drawing on established vocabulary scholarship and recent literature, the article discusses vocabulary breadth and depth, receptive and productive knowledge, contextual learning, deliberate and incidental learning, extensive reading, repeated encounters, retrieval, morphological awareness, collocations, lexical chunks, dictionary use, and digital learning resources. It argues that vocabulary and reading have a reciprocal relationship: lexical knowledge supports comprehension, while sustained reading provides meaningful opportunities for vocabulary growth. A similarly important relationship exists between vocabulary and speaking. Productive oral communication requires rapid lexical retrieval, appropriate lexical selection, collocation knowledge, discourse-organising expressions, and the ability to adapt language to context. The article further proposes an integrated vocabulary-development cycle—encounter, notice, understand, record, review, retrieve, use, and reuse—as a practical framework for classroom and independent learning. The discussion highlights the importance of moving from receptive recognition towards productive and flexible use without treating vocabulary size as a sufficient measure of communicative competence. The article concludes that vocabulary development is most productive when it is embedded in meaningful reading, interaction, speaking, reflection, and repeated use. For higher education, an integrated approach can strengthen students' access to academic texts and their ability to communicate ideas with greater clarity, precision, and appropriateness.

Keywords: Vocabulary development, vocabulary knowledge, lexical breadth, lexical depth, reading skills, speaking skills, receptive vocabulary, productive vocabulary, English language learning, higher education

Introduction

Language proficiency depends on a network of interacting resources, including vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, discourse knowledge, listening, reading, writing, and pragmatic awareness. Among these resources, vocabulary has a particularly visible role because lexical items carry much of the propositional content of communication. A learner may understand grammatical structures yet struggle to interpret a text when too many lexical items are unfamiliar. In the same way, a learner may know what they wish to communicate but experience hesitation when the lexical resources needed to express an idea are not readily available. Vocabulary is therefore not a peripheral component added to language learning after grammar has been mastered; it is one of the resources through which language knowledge becomes usable communication.

The importance of vocabulary becomes especially clear in educational contexts. Students are expected to read textbooks, articles, instructions, reports, and digital materials; participate in classroom discussion; listen to lectures; give presentations; and increasingly communicate in academic and professional environments. These activities place different demands on vocabulary. A student may need to recognise a specialised term while reading, understand a related expression in a lecture, use an appropriate academic phrase in a presentation, and select a less formal expression

in an everyday conversation. Vocabulary development must therefore prepare learners for variation in language, not merely increase the number of words they can recognise.

Research on vocabulary learning has progressively moved away from a narrow view of word learning as memorising definitions. Vocabulary knowledge is now commonly treated as multidimensional and incremental. A learner can know a word at one level while still developing other dimensions of knowledge about it. For example, a student may recognise the word “conduct” in a research article but not know its pronunciation, its noun meaning, its common combinations, or the circumstances in which it is natural to use the verb. Similarly, a learner may understand “significant” in a general sense but require further experience to distinguish its academic use from everyday uses such as “a significant change” or “a significant amount.” The practical implication is that vocabulary development should be understood as growth in the quality, flexibility, accessibility, and usefulness of lexical knowledge.

Reading and speaking provide especially important environments for this development. Reading exposes learners to vocabulary in meaningful discourse, allowing them to encounter words repeatedly and observe how meaning changes with context. Vocabulary knowledge, in turn, supports reading comprehension by making word

recognition and interpretation more efficient. Speaking provides a different but complementary environment. It requires learners to retrieve lexical items quickly, combine them into meaningful expressions, respond to others, and adjust language to purpose and audience. A word that can be recognised in a text is not necessarily available for spontaneous oral use. Productive development therefore requires opportunities for retrieval and meaningful communication.

The central argument of this conceptual article is that vocabulary development should be integrated with reading and speaking rather than treated as an isolated instructional component. The discussion focuses on the nature of vocabulary knowledge, principles and strategies for vocabulary development, the reciprocal vocabulary-reading relationship, the vocabulary-speaking relationship, practical applications for learners and teachers, and contemporary issues including digital resources and artificial intelligence. Because the article is conceptual, it does not report original empirical data or claim findings from a new sample. Instead, it synthesises relevant scholarship to develop an integrated pedagogical perspective.

Conceptualising Vocabulary Knowledge and Vocabulary Development

Vocabulary can be described broadly as the words and lexical expressions known or used by an individual, but such a definition is only a starting point. Words are connected to sounds, spellings, grammatical patterns, meanings, associations, collocations, discourse functions, and social contexts. Consequently, knowing a word is better understood as possessing a network of related knowledge than as remembering a single translation. Vocabulary development is the gradual strengthening and expansion of this network through exposure, attention, practice, retrieval, interaction, and use.

One influential distinction is between vocabulary breadth and vocabulary depth. Breadth refers broadly to the number of lexical items known, whereas depth refers to how well those items are known. Depth may include knowledge of pronunciation, spelling, grammatical behaviour, word families, multiple meanings, collocations, register, associations, and appropriate contexts of use. Breadth matters because readers and listeners need access to a sufficient number of familiar words to process language efficiently. Depth matters because communication requires more than recognition: learners must interpret and select words accurately and appropriately. A programme that concentrates exclusively on adding new items may increase breadth while leaving important aspects of depth underdeveloped.

Receptive and productive vocabulary provide another useful distinction. Receptive vocabulary includes words a learner can recognise and understand when encountered in reading or listening. Productive vocabulary includes words the learner can retrieve and use in speaking or writing. These categories overlap but are not identical. Learners commonly understand more words than they can use spontaneously. This difference is not evidence that receptive learning has failed; rather, it reflects the additional demands involved in productive retrieval. Production requires access to form, meaning, grammatical pattern, pronunciation, collocation, and context under time pressure. Pedagogy should therefore provide a pathway from recognition to increasingly independent use.

Vocabulary knowledge is also incremental. A first encounter may establish only a rough meaning. A second encounter may reveal pronunciation or a new grammatical form; later encounters may show collocations, register, figurative meaning, or discipline-specific use. This incremental character explains why forgetting is a normal part of vocabulary learning and why repeated encounters are necessary. It also means that vocabulary assessment immediately after teaching should not be interpreted as evidence of complete mastery. Durable knowledge is more likely when learners meet the same lexical item across different contexts and retrieve it over time.

Context has a central role in this process. A dictionary definition can clarify meaning, but context shows how a word behaves in real discourse. Consider “issue”: it can refer to a topic or problem, an edition of a publication, or the act of formally giving something. Encountering these uses in meaningful contexts allows learners to develop a flexible lexical representation. Context also provides information about grammatical patterns and collocations. Learning “conduct” together with “conduct research” is different from memorising “conduct = carry out.” The former links the item to a useful academic phrase and provides a model for production.

Morphology offers another route to vocabulary growth. Many English words are related through roots, prefixes, suffixes, and derivational patterns. Knowledge of relationships among educate, education, educational, educator, and educationally can help learners interpret unfamiliar forms and select appropriate forms for different grammatical contexts. Morphological awareness is particularly useful in academic reading because academic texts often contain derived forms and nominalisations. It can also support productive language by giving learners alternatives that fit different syntactic positions.

Collocations and multi-word units deserve comparable attention. Knowing the words “make,” “decision,” “strong,” and “evidence” separately does not automatically guarantee knowledge of “make a decision” or “strong evidence.” Such combinations are frequent and can reduce the processing burden of speech when they become familiar. For academic communication, expressions such as “the evidence suggests,” “in contrast,” “a possible explanation,” and “from this perspective” can help learners organise ideas and participate in discussion. Vocabulary instruction that ignores combinations may therefore leave learners with a collection of words but insufficient knowledge of how those words naturally operate together.

Register and appropriateness are further dimensions of vocabulary knowledge. Language suitable for an informal conversation may be unsuitable in an academic presentation. Similarly, a technical term may be precise within one discipline but unnecessary in a general conversation. Effective vocabulary development therefore involves learning not only what an expression means but also when, where, and with whom it is appropriate. This perspective discourages the assumption that advanced vocabulary simply means using longer or less frequent words. Communicative effectiveness depends on accurate and context-sensitive choice.

Vocabulary development also involves learner autonomy. Classroom instruction can introduce and practise important vocabulary, but learners will encounter far more language outside scheduled lessons. Students need strategies for

deciding which words deserve attention, inferring meaning, consulting dictionaries, recording useful expressions, reviewing items, and seeking opportunities for use. Autonomous vocabulary learning is not simply independent memorisation. It involves making informed decisions about language exposure and turning everyday encounters into learning opportunities.

The conceptual consequence is that vocabulary should be treated as a dynamic system rather than a static list. Breadth, depth, receptiveness, productivity, morphology, collocation, register, and accessibility interact. Reading and speaking draw on these dimensions in different ways. A strong instructional model should therefore combine broad exposure with selective attention, explicit explanation with contextual learning, and recognition with productive retrieval.

Principles and Strategies for Effective Vocabulary Development

Vocabulary development benefits from combining deliberate learning with meaning-focused exposure. Deliberate learning is useful when learners need to establish initial knowledge of high-value words, clarify difficult forms, or prepare for a particular academic or professional task. Meaning-focused exposure, by contrast, provides opportunities to encounter vocabulary while the learner's primary purpose is understanding a message. A balanced programme avoids the false choice between memorisation and communication. Both have roles, but they serve different functions.

Extensive reading is one of the most practical forms of sustained language exposure. When learners read materials that are sufficiently accessible and personally interesting, they encounter familiar vocabulary repeatedly and meet new items in context. Research on meaning-focused input has shown that reading can contribute to incidental vocabulary learning, although the amount and nature of learning vary with factors such as word frequency, prior knowledge, text difficulty, and task conditions. Reading should therefore be viewed as an important source of vocabulary growth rather than as a guaranteed mechanism through which every unfamiliar word will be learned.

A useful reading strategy is selective noticing. Learners do not need to stop for every unfamiliar word. Instead, they can identify items that are central to comprehension, recur across the text, or appear especially useful for future communication. After reading, they can record a small number of high-value words or phrases, investigate their meaning and usage, and create original examples. This preserves reading flow while converting selected encounters into more deliberate learning opportunities.

Repeated exposure is essential because lexical knowledge is fragile when it is based on a single encounter. Review can be distributed over time rather than concentrated in one session. A word introduced today can be recalled tomorrow, revisited several days later, and used again in a subsequent discussion or writing task. Spaced retrieval is valuable because it requires learners to reconstruct knowledge rather than simply recognise it immediately after studying. The goal is not mechanical repetition but progressively easier and more flexible access.

Vocabulary notebooks can support this process when they contain more than translations. A useful entry can include the word, pronunciation, part of speech, core meaning, an

example from a text, collocations, related forms, a learner-generated sentence, and notes about register or common errors. The format can be adapted to learner level. Digital notebooks can add audio, hyperlinks, images, and spaced-review functions. The important principle is that the record should represent useful lexical knowledge rather than become an uncontrolled list of unfamiliar items.

Dictionary use should also be taught as a skill. Bilingual dictionaries can be valuable, particularly when learners need rapid clarification, but monolingual dictionaries can provide richer information about definitions, examples, grammatical patterns, pronunciation, and usage. Students can be taught to compare definitions, examine example sentences, and notice collocations. Digital dictionaries make this information highly accessible, but accessibility should not lead to automatic lookup of every unfamiliar item. The learner should first consider whether the word is important, inferable, or worth remembering.

Morphological analysis can make vocabulary learning more efficient. Teachers can help learners notice productive prefixes, suffixes, roots, and families, while also warning that morphological analysis is not always sufficient to determine meaning. For example, knowing the relationship between “analyse,” “analysis,” and “analytical” is useful, but learners still need to learn the pronunciation, spelling, grammatical behaviour, and conventional combinations of each form. Morphology is therefore a support for lexical learning, not a substitute for contextual exposure.

Collocation learning is particularly important for speaking and writing. Instead of presenting a new word alone, teachers can introduce a small set of frequent and useful combinations. Learners can then practise these combinations in sentences, questions, short dialogues, or presentations. This approach supports fluency because familiar lexical combinations can be retrieved as units while the speaker concentrates on meaning and interaction. It also improves naturalness by helping learners avoid direct word-for-word transfer from another language.

Retrieval practice should be connected to meaningful use. A learner can close the vocabulary notebook and attempt to recall a word from a definition, a context, a synonym, or a communicative prompt. The next stage can require production: using the word in a sentence, explaining an idea, summarising a text, or responding to a question. The sequence from recognition to retrieval to communication makes learning more demanding but also more relevant to real language use.

Personal relevance can increase the likelihood that learners will attend to and reuse vocabulary. Students interested in sport, technology, business, literature, science, or social issues can choose some reading and listening materials within those areas. Personal choice should be balanced with curriculum requirements, but allowing some autonomy helps learners encounter vocabulary in contexts they are motivated to understand. Topic familiarity may also reduce cognitive load and allow attention to shift towards language. Writing can reinforce vocabulary even when the principal goal is reading and speaking. Short summaries, reflective paragraphs, learning journals, and response notes require learners to retrieve words and organise them into meaningful propositions. Writing can reveal gaps that remain invisible during recognition. A learner may understand a word in a text but discover while writing that they cannot confidently produce the correct form. Such gaps can then become targets for further learning.

Listening and viewing should complement reading. Audiovisual resources provide pronunciation, rhythm, intonation, gesture, and contextual information. Research comparing modes of input indicates that different forms of input can contribute differently to incidental vocabulary learning. This suggests that vocabulary programmes should not depend exclusively on written text. Hearing a word after seeing it can strengthen form-meaning connections, while viewing it in context can provide additional cues.

Digital tools can support vocabulary development through electronic dictionaries, flashcards, learner corpora, reading platforms, subtitles, pronunciation tools, and conversational applications. Their educational value depends on how they are used. Technology can increase exposure and provide immediate feedback, but passive scrolling or collecting large word lists does not necessarily produce durable knowledge. Learners need tasks that require noticing, retrieval, comparison, explanation, and use. Technology is most useful when it supports sound learning principles rather than replacing them.

Artificial intelligence introduces additional possibilities for personalised vocabulary practice. Learners can request examples at different proficiency levels, generate practice dialogues, ask for distinctions between near-synonyms, and rehearse short conversations. At the same time, AI-generated examples require critical evaluation. Learners should verify unfamiliar information, compare examples with reliable dictionaries or authentic sources, and avoid assuming that every generated sentence represents natural or contextually appropriate usage. AI can therefore function as a practice resource while human judgement remains important.

The most useful overarching strategy is integration. A learner might encounter “sustainable” in a reading article, infer its meaning, confirm its use in a dictionary, record “sustainable development” and “sustainable practices,” review it later, use it in a written summary, and then discuss the topic orally. This sequence gives the word multiple connections and moves it from passive recognition towards productive use. The same principle can be applied to individual words, phrases, collocations, and academic expressions.

Vocabulary Development and Reading Skills

Reading and vocabulary have a reciprocal relationship. Vocabulary knowledge contributes to the reader's ability to construct meaning, while reading exposes the learner to words in meaningful discourse. This relationship means that vocabulary instruction and reading instruction should not be designed as completely separate activities. A student with insufficient vocabulary may struggle to access texts, while a student who reads regularly has greater opportunity to encounter and consolidate lexical knowledge.

Vocabulary supports reading at several levels. At the most immediate level, knowledge of familiar words allows faster recognition. At the sentence level, it helps the reader interpret grammatical and semantic relationships. At the discourse level, knowledge of key terms supports the construction of a coherent representation of the topic. When many important lexical items are unfamiliar, the reader may need to devote substantial attention to local word identification, leaving fewer cognitive resources available for connecting ideas, evaluating arguments, and drawing inferences.

The importance of vocabulary coverage should not be interpreted as a single universal threshold that applies to every reader and every text. Reading purpose matters. A student reading for the general idea can tolerate more unfamiliar vocabulary than a student studying a text closely for examination or research. Text type, topic familiarity, linguistic background, and task demands also affect comprehension. Consequently, vocabulary instruction should prepare learners not only to know words but also to manage unfamiliar vocabulary strategically.

Contextual inference is one such strategy. Readers can examine surrounding sentences, examples, contrasts, definitions, grammatical clues, and the overall topic to infer a plausible meaning. However, contextual inference has limits. If too many words are unfamiliar or the context provides insufficient information, guessing becomes unreliable. Teachers should therefore teach contextual inference as one tool within a larger strategy that includes selective dictionary use and later review.

Repeated reading can strengthen vocabulary knowledge because a word encountered in one passage may appear again in another. Each encounter can confirm an earlier interpretation or add new information. A learner who first meets “yield” in a scientific context may later encounter it in economics, agriculture, or everyday writing. The developing lexical representation becomes richer as the learner encounters additional contexts. This illustrates why vocabulary depth grows gradually rather than through a single definition.

Extensive reading can be especially valuable because it increases the amount of language encountered. Learners who read regularly can develop familiarity with high-frequency vocabulary, common grammatical patterns, discourse markers, and recurring lexical combinations. The choice of materials is important: excessively difficult texts can create frustration and encourage constant dictionary use, while materials that are too easy may provide limited opportunities for new learning. A programme can combine accessible extensive reading with more demanding close reading.

Academic reading creates additional lexical demands. University students may encounter abstract nouns, technical terminology, nominalisations, discipline-specific expressions, complex noun phrases, and words whose everyday meanings differ from academic meanings. Academic vocabulary development therefore needs to be linked to the disciplines and tasks students actually encounter. Coxhead's work on academic vocabulary and later scholarship on academic spoken and written language illustrate the value of examining vocabulary according to communicative purpose rather than treating all words as equally important.

Reading-to-speaking activities provide a bridge between receptive and productive vocabulary. Students can read a short article and then explain its main idea, summarise a section, compare two positions, answer questions, or discuss the implications. Such tasks require learners to retrieve vocabulary from the text while reorganising it for oral communication. The aim is not to reproduce the text word for word but to transform input into personally meaningful speech.

Reading aloud has a place in language learning, particularly for connecting written forms with pronunciation and rhythm, but it should not replace silent meaning-focused

reading. Students need opportunities to process text for comprehension and to develop independent reading habits. A balanced programme can therefore include extensive silent reading, close reading, selective reading aloud, and post-reading interaction.

Vocabulary journals can strengthen the reading process when they focus on recurring and useful items. Students might record why a word was important, what clues helped them infer it, which collocations appeared, and how they could use it in another context. This turns reading into a source of conscious lexical noticing without requiring the learner to record every unfamiliar item.

The reciprocal nature of the relationship also has an important motivational implication. If students can understand more of what they read, they may experience greater access to interesting content. Greater reading engagement then creates more exposure to vocabulary. Conversely, persistent difficulty with vocabulary can make reading feel effortful and reduce voluntary reading. Teachers can support the cycle by selecting materials that are meaningful, appropriately challenging, and connected with learners' interests and academic needs.

Recent theoretical work also emphasises the relationship between oral vocabulary and learning to read new words. Spoken knowledge can support the mapping between unfamiliar written forms and known language, while reading contributes to the development of more detailed lexical representations. This reinforces a broader point: reading and vocabulary should not be conceptualised as isolated abilities. They develop through interconnected experiences with spoken and written language.

For higher education, an integrated reading-vocabulary approach can be organised around three stages. Before reading, students preview the topic and identify key terms. During reading, they infer, notice, annotate, and monitor comprehension. After reading, they review selected vocabulary and use it in summaries or discussion. Such a sequence makes vocabulary learning purposeful while preserving the primary communicative goal of reading.

Thus, vocabulary development enhances reading not simply by increasing the number of known words but by strengthening the quality and accessibility of lexical knowledge. Reading, in turn, becomes a major environment in which this knowledge is extended, tested, and refined.

Vocabulary Development and Speaking Skills

Speaking places distinctive demands on vocabulary because oral communication unfolds in real time. A reader can pause, reread, consult notes, or return to a previous sentence. A speaker normally has to select words while simultaneously planning content, monitoring the listener, managing pronunciation, and responding to interaction. Lexical accessibility therefore matters. A learner may know a word receptively but fail to retrieve it quickly enough during conversation. Vocabulary instruction should consequently include opportunities for repeated oral retrieval.

Vocabulary contributes to speaking in several related ways: fluency, lexical variety, precision, appropriateness, and discourse organisation. Fluency is affected when speakers repeatedly stop to search for basic lexical items. Variety allows speakers to avoid excessive repetition when alternatives are genuinely appropriate. Precision enables the speaker to communicate distinctions that general words

cannot express. Appropriateness allows lexical choices to match the topic, audience, purpose, and level of formality. These dimensions overlap but should not be treated as identical.

A larger vocabulary does not automatically produce better speaking. Effective oral communication also requires grammar, pronunciation, listening, discourse organisation, pragmatic knowledge, and interactional skills. It is therefore more useful to think of vocabulary as a necessary resource within a larger communicative system. Research on academic speaking nevertheless provides evidence of meaningful relationships between vocabulary size and aspects of oral performance. Wang-Taylor and Clenton, for example, reported relationships between academic vocabulary size and measures of speaking fluency and lexical use among university learners in their study context. Such findings support the pedagogical relevance of academic vocabulary while not implying that vocabulary alone determines speaking ability.

Productive vocabulary development benefits from lexical chunks and discourse expressions. Phrases such as "in my view," "one possible explanation," "for example," "on the other hand," "I agree to some extent," and "the main point is" can help speakers organise ideas and manage interaction. These expressions are especially useful in academic presentations and discussions because they provide linguistic resources for functions such as introducing a topic, comparing ideas, qualifying claims, clarifying meaning, and concluding an argument.

Collocation is closely connected with oral naturalness. Speakers who know individual words but not their conventional combinations may construct expressions that are grammatically possible yet unusual. Teaching selected collocations can make production more efficient and reduce the burden of assembling speech word by word. Learners can practise collocations through short dialogues, substitution activities, information gaps, and topic-based discussions, followed by opportunities to use them independently.

Pair work increases opportunities for individual production. Short exchanges can be designed around familiar situations, academic topics, problem-solving tasks, or personal experiences. The teacher can provide a small vocabulary bank before the activity, but the objective should be meaningful communication rather than forced insertion of every target word. Students can then repeat a similar task with a new partner, allowing the same vocabulary to be retrieved again in a slightly different context.

Group discussion extends interaction by requiring learners to listen and respond to multiple speakers. Structured roles can support participation. One student may introduce the topic, another provide an example, another ask a clarification question, and another summarise. Such roles create communicative reasons for using particular expressions. The activity can also develop interactional vocabulary for agreeing, disagreeing politely, requesting clarification, interrupting appropriately, and reformulating an idea.

Presentations provide a bridge between planned and spontaneous speech. Students can prepare a topic, identify useful vocabulary, rehearse key expressions, and then present to an audience. A second stage can involve questions from classmates, requiring learners to move from prepared language to spontaneous retrieval. This

combination is particularly relevant to higher education, where students may need to explain concepts, report information, defend an argument, or present a project.

Storytelling is another productive vocabulary activity because it links words to sequence, emotion, causality, and personal meaning. Learners can retell a short story, describe an experience, or construct a narrative from a set of prompts. Narrative tasks encourage the use of verbs, descriptive adjectives, temporal expressions, and discourse markers. Repeating the story to a new listener can provide additional retrieval practice without requiring an entirely new topic.

Role play can develop situational vocabulary for contexts such as interviews, customer service, healthcare, banking, travel, classrooms, workplaces, and professional meetings. Because the language is connected to a clear communicative purpose, learners can more easily see why particular expressions are useful. Role play can also introduce register awareness: the same intention may be expressed differently in an informal conversation and a formal professional interaction.

Pronunciation should be integrated with vocabulary learning. Knowing a written word is not enough for oral communication. Learners need to connect spelling, pronunciation, syllable stress, and, where relevant, connected speech. Audio dictionaries and recordings can provide models, but learners also need to use the word in phrases and sentences. Pronunciation practice is more meaningful when it is linked to words and expressions that students actually intend to use.

Self-recording can make speaking practice more reflective. Students can record a short response, listen to it, and identify repeated general words, pauses, missing vocabulary, pronunciation problems, or opportunities for more precise expression. A second recording can then incorporate selected improvements. This process encourages learners to notice the gap between what they intended to say and what they were able to produce.

Feedback should support communication rather than interrupt it continuously. During a fluency-focused activity, teachers can note recurring lexical problems and discuss them after the task. Immediate correction may be appropriate for a particular pronunciation or vocabulary target, but excessive interruption can reduce willingness to speak. A balanced approach gives learners opportunities to communicate first and reflect on language afterwards.

Speaking also develops vocabulary. When learners attempt to express a meaning and discover that they lack a word, they may ask for help, paraphrase, notice a useful expression used by another speaker, or later search for an appropriate term. Interaction therefore creates opportunities for vocabulary learning as well as vocabulary use. Classroom discussion should be viewed not only as an assessment of vocabulary but also as an environment in which vocabulary can grow.

Confidence should be approached carefully in relation to vocabulary. Limited lexical access can contribute to hesitation, while repeated successful use can make communication more manageable. However, the educational goal should not be to eliminate all hesitation or encourage students to display advanced words. The goal is to develop a sufficiently accessible and flexible lexical repertoire so that learners can communicate meaningfully, repair communication when necessary, and adapt language to context.

The relationship between vocabulary and speaking is therefore reciprocal. Vocabulary supports speech, while speech provides retrieval, feedback, interaction, and opportunities for lexical growth. An effective programme should deliberately connect reading input with speaking output so that learners repeatedly move between understanding language and using it.

An Integrated Pedagogical Framework for Learners and Teachers

The discussion above suggests that vocabulary development is most useful when organised as a continuing cycle rather than a sequence of isolated vocabulary lessons. A practical framework can be expressed as eight interconnected stages: Encounter, Notice, Understand, Record, Review, Retrieve, Use, and Reuse. The stages are not strictly linear. Learners may move backwards when they encounter a new meaning or forward when they spontaneously use a familiar word. The value of the framework lies in making the major processes visible.

Encounter refers to exposure to vocabulary through reading, listening, viewing, classroom interaction, and authentic or carefully designed materials. The objective is not to notice every word. Learners need substantial exposure to language in order to develop familiarity with frequent patterns and expressions. Teachers can increase the quality of encounters by selecting texts and tasks that are relevant to students' goals.

Notice involves paying attention to a word, phrase, or lexical pattern as something potentially useful. Noticing can be prompted through highlighting, questions, comparison of examples, or learner curiosity. A student may notice that “conduct” occurs with “research,” or that “evidence” frequently appears with adjectives such as “strong” or “convincing.” Noticing turns passive exposure into a possible learning event.

Understand involves developing an initial interpretation of form and meaning and checking it against context or reliable reference sources. Learners should be encouraged to consider more than a translation. They can ask: What does the word mean here? What part of speech is it? What words occur around it? Is it formal or informal? Is there a related word form? Is the meaning different in another context? These questions deepen lexical understanding.

Record involves creating a manageable representation of the word or expression for later review. The record may include meaning, pronunciation, collocation, example, related forms, and a learner-generated sentence. The objective is selectivity. Recording hundreds of words without reviewing them is less useful than maintaining a smaller, purposeful set that can be revisited and used.

Review involves returning to vocabulary after an interval. Review can take many forms: flashcards, retrieval questions, short quizzes, reading the original passage again, matching words with collocations, or revisiting a vocabulary notebook. The key is to space review over time and vary the context. Variation helps learners avoid associating a word with only one sentence or topic.

Retrieve involves attempting to recall a word without immediately looking at the answer. Retrieval can be receptive—recognising a meaning from a word—or productive—recalling the word from a definition, idea, picture, or communicative need. Productive retrieval is

particularly relevant to speaking because real conversation requires access without a visible word list.

Use involves putting vocabulary into meaningful language. Learners can use words in a sentence, summary, discussion, presentation, role play, or written response. The activity should require communication rather than mechanical repetition. If the learner uses the word incorrectly, feedback can help refine the developing representation.

Reuse is the stage at which vocabulary becomes part of an expanding lexical repertoire. A word can appear again in later reading, be used in another conversation, or be applied to a new topic. Reuse across contexts is important because it helps learners develop flexibility. A word learned only in one sentence may remain context-bound; a word used across several situations becomes more accessible and semantically differentiated.

Teachers can implement the cycle through integrated lessons. A reading lesson might introduce a short article, ask students to identify recurring expressions, discuss meanings, record selected items, and then use those items in a post-reading discussion. A speaking lesson can reverse the direction: students receive a small vocabulary set, discuss a topic, listen to peers, revise their word choices, and later read a short text containing the same vocabulary. Such recycling makes reading and speaking mutually supportive.

Assessment should reflect the same multidimensional perspective. Recognition tasks can measure aspects of receptive knowledge, while sentence completion, short explanations, summaries, presentations, and discussions can reveal productive use. No single test can capture all dimensions of vocabulary knowledge. Teachers should therefore use a combination of low-stakes checks and performance-based tasks when the aim is communicative development.

A practical weekly routine for a higher-education learner could combine several activities: regular meaning-focused reading; selection of a small number of useful words and phrases; spaced review; short written summaries; pair or group discussion; and occasional self-recorded speaking. The routine need not be lengthy if it is consistent. The key is that vocabulary should repeatedly move between input, attention, memory, and use.

The framework also supports differentiation. Beginners may need high-frequency vocabulary and concrete contexts, whereas advanced learners may need academic and discipline-specific language. Students preparing for professional communication may need workplace expressions and formal interactional vocabulary. Teachers should therefore prioritise vocabulary according to learners' purposes rather than using an identical list for every group.

A vocabulary-rich classroom does not require constant vocabulary testing. Teachers can create opportunities for words to recur naturally across lessons. A word introduced in reading can appear later in a writing prompt, discussion, quiz, or presentation. Classroom displays, thematic vocabulary banks, and student-generated examples can provide additional exposure. The overall aim is to create an environment in which useful vocabulary is repeatedly encountered and meaningfully reused.

Contemporary Issues, Limitations, and Implications for Higher Education

Vocabulary teaching faces a fundamental prioritisation problem: English contains an extremely large number of

lexical items, while learners have limited time and attention. It is neither possible nor necessary to teach every word. Selection should consider frequency, usefulness, relevance to the learner's discipline and goals, communicative value, and likelihood of recurrence. Academic programmes should distinguish between vocabulary that students need to recognise and vocabulary they need to produce actively.

Forgetting is another persistent challenge. Early familiarity can create an illusion of learning because recognition immediately after instruction is easier than delayed retrieval. Learners therefore need opportunities to recall vocabulary after intervals and in different contexts. Teachers can support this through cumulative review rather than treating each unit as finished when the examination has ended.

Polysemy and ambiguity make vocabulary learning more complex. Common words often have multiple related or unrelated meanings, and students may initially overgeneralise a single meaning. Contextual examples help learners gradually build a network of meanings. Teachers can compare examples and explicitly point out when a word changes grammatical category or semantic function. Such comparison is particularly useful for academic words that have both everyday and specialised meanings.

Cross-linguistic influence is also relevant for learners of English as a second or foreign language. Students may transfer pronunciation patterns, word combinations, meanings, or discourse conventions from another language. Such transfer is not necessarily negative; prior linguistic knowledge can provide useful connections. However, when a direct translation produces an unusual English expression, learners need explicit contrastive information and opportunities for practice. Collocation teaching can be especially valuable in this area.

Digital language environments create both opportunities and challenges. Learners now encounter English through websites, social platforms, video, podcasts, games, online courses, and professional communication. This diversity increases access to language but also exposes students to slang, abbreviations, fragmented language, and context-specific expressions. Teachers should help students distinguish between language that is useful for informal interaction and language appropriate for academic or professional contexts.

Artificial intelligence can provide additional opportunities for personalised practice, but its use requires critical literacy. AI systems can generate examples, explanations, dialogues, quizzes, and paraphrases rapidly. Yet learners should not assume that every generated expression is equally natural, accurate, current, or suitable for a particular context. Teachers can turn this limitation into a learning activity by asking students to compare AI-generated examples with dictionary entries, corpora, textbooks, or authentic sources and identify differences.

Higher education also needs to recognise that vocabulary development is linked to academic participation. Students who can read disciplinary materials more efficiently may have greater access to course content. Students who can use appropriate academic vocabulary may participate more effectively in discussions and presentations. This does not mean that vocabulary alone determines academic success; rather, lexical knowledge is one component of the broader linguistic and academic resources students require.

Academic vocabulary should not be taught as a universal list detached from discipline. Some general academic words

recur across fields, while other terms are highly specialised. A business student, science student, education student, and literature student will share some academic vocabulary but also require different disciplinary repertoires. Teachers can therefore combine general academic vocabulary with discipline-specific texts and tasks. This contextual approach is more likely to connect vocabulary learning with authentic academic purposes.

An additional implication concerns equity and access. Students enter higher education with different linguistic histories, educational experiences, reading habits, and exposure to English. A vocabulary programme should therefore avoid treating prior vocabulary knowledge as a fixed measure of ability. Diagnostic activities can identify areas for support, while accessible reading and structured speaking opportunities can provide routes for development. Support should be developmental rather than deficit-oriented.

The conceptual nature of this article also establishes limits. It does not present a new experiment, longitudinal dataset, intervention study, or statistical estimate of vocabulary growth. Consequently, its framework should be interpreted as a synthesis and pedagogical proposal rather than an empirically validated model. Future research could examine the framework through classroom interventions, longitudinal studies, learner diaries, vocabulary measures, reading-comprehension tasks, and speaking-performance analyses. Such studies could investigate which combinations of activities are most beneficial for different learner populations.

Future scholarship may also benefit from examining vocabulary development across modes. Reading, listening, speaking, viewing, and writing provide different opportunities for noticing and retrieval. Digital environments increasingly combine these modes. Research can explore how learners move vocabulary from one mode to another—for example, from reading an article to discussing it, from hearing a lecture to summarising it, or from watching a video to presenting a response. Such multimodal movement is particularly relevant to contemporary higher education.

The most important pedagogical implication is therefore integration. Vocabulary should be visible in the curriculum but not isolated from communication. Students should encounter important vocabulary, investigate it, review it, and use it repeatedly. Reading can provide rich input; speaking can provide productive retrieval; writing can consolidate form and meaning; listening can strengthen phonological representations; and reflection can help learners become more autonomous. The strength of the approach lies in the interaction among these processes.

Conclusion

Vocabulary development is a fundamental dimension of language learning because lexical knowledge connects language form with communicative meaning. A useful understanding of vocabulary extends beyond the number of words a learner can recognise. It includes knowledge of form, meaning, pronunciation, grammatical behaviour, collocation, word-family relationships, register, contextual use, and the ability to retrieve and produce language appropriately. Vocabulary knowledge develops incrementally through repeated encounters, meaningful attention, retrieval, interaction, and use.

The relationship between vocabulary and reading is reciprocal. Vocabulary knowledge facilitates comprehension by supporting efficient word recognition and interpretation, while reading provides repeated exposure to words and expressions in meaningful contexts. Extensive reading, close reading, contextual inference, selective dictionary use, and reading-to-speaking activities can therefore work together to develop lexical knowledge and comprehension. Academic reading requires particular attention to general academic vocabulary, discipline-specific terminology, lexical patterns, and abstract language.

The relationship between vocabulary and speaking is equally important. Oral communication requires rapid access to lexical resources and the ability to select words and expressions according to meaning, audience, purpose, and context. Vocabulary contributes to fluency, variety, precision, and discourse organisation, while speaking itself provides opportunities for retrieval, feedback, interaction, and further learning. Nevertheless, vocabulary should be understood as one component of speaking competence rather than a complete explanation of oral performance.

For learners and teachers, the practical message is that vocabulary development should move from isolated recognition towards flexible and meaningful use. The integrated cycle proposed in this article—Encounter, Notice, Understand, Record, Review, Retrieve, Use, and Reuse—offers a practical way to organise this movement. It combines deliberate learning with meaning-focused exposure and connects vocabulary with reading, speaking, writing, listening, and interaction. The cycle can be adapted to different proficiency levels, disciplines, and educational settings.

In higher education, such integration is particularly relevant because students need language for both academic access and communication. They read increasingly complex texts, participate in discussions, deliver presentations, collaborate with peers, and prepare for professional contexts. A vocabulary programme that supports these purposes should prioritise useful and recurring language, encourage extensive exposure, provide opportunities for productive retrieval, and develop learners' ability to judge appropriateness rather than simply display advanced words. Ultimately, the value of vocabulary lies not in the size of a word list but in what learners can do with the language they know. Words become educationally powerful when learners can recognise them, understand them in context, remember them over time, retrieve them when needed, combine them appropriately, and use them to communicate ideas. Reading supplies a rich environment for encountering and developing lexical knowledge; speaking provides a setting in which that knowledge becomes active. When these processes are intentionally connected, vocabulary development can contribute to stronger reading comprehension, more effective oral communication, and broader communicative competence.

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